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# Minilateral security's relevance to US strategy in the Indo-Pacific: challenges and prospects

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## ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific region's security landscape is unfolding in highly uncertain and potentially explosive ways. The postwar American-led network of bilateral alliances – underpinned by concrete guarantees of extended deterrence and containment – is now yielding to a more diverse set of alignments and coalitions to manage an increasingly complex array of regional security issues. Multilateralism and minilateralism have emerged as two increasingly prominent forms of such cooperation. Minilateralism's informality and flexibility appeals to those who are sceptical about multilateralism's traditional focus on norm adherence and community-building even as great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is sharply intensifying. However, minilateralism's track record in the region is underdeveloped. The potential for this policy approach to be applied by the United States and its regional security partners as an enduring and credible means of diplomatic and security collaboration in the region will remain unfulfilled as long as the Trump administration's own geopolitical orientation remains uncertain.

**KEYWORDS** Asia power web; minilateral solution; trilateralism; 'bridge-building'; 'hub-and-spokes' alliance politics; Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG); Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD); Quadrilateral Initiative

## Introduction

Effectively managing Indo-Pacific security has arguably become the most pressing imperative for preserving contemporary global peace and stability. Acute tensions over traditional security issues such as the Korean Peninsula, security dilemmas in the East and South China Seas and the broader strategic implications of 'China's rise' remain all too evident. Newer security concerns relating to migration, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, terrorism, drug trafficking, cybercrime, climate change and pandemics are likewise commanding regional officials' attention and influencing their policy agendas. Uncertainties relating to US President Donald Trump's economic and security postures directed toward Asia form an uncertain, complex and potentially explosive strategic landscape within the world's wealthiest and most dynamic region.

This landscape is further complicated by changes throughout Asia in postwar alliances, alignments and unaffiliated actors. The postwar American ‘hub-and-spokes’ alliance network has yielded to a broader array of security coalitions targeted on specific threats and issues. Despite North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s recent visit to Beijing, the People’s Republic of China’s historic security ties with North Korea remain strained as the latter moves aggressively to establish strategic leverage in its own right. Traditionally, non-aligned actors such as India and various member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are exploring advanced economic and security collaboration with other large and small powers within the increasingly fluid Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment. Russia yearns to play a major role in Asia’s evolving strategic landscape as part of its global quest to challenge and revise what it views as the United States’ decreasing global hegemony.

### Order-building and alliance transition

Within this broader context of regional security cooperation and competition, two overlapping and increasingly critical trends have surfaced. First, China is now assuming a more central role in the shaping of any future Indo-Pacific regional security order. The extent to which Beijing collaborates or competes with the region’s maritime powers – the United States, Japan, India and (to a much lesser extent) Australia – on various issues and crises will determine to what extent the region languishes in a multipolar state of anarchy or eventually develops into a concrete regional security order. China’s collaboration with the US and its allies is now clearly required to defuse the North Korean nuclear crisis, and the level of cooperation that China generates with Washington and its allies in doing so constitutes a crucial test for regional war avoidance. Realising these objectives, however, does not necessarily constitute either the ‘major power relations’ model which has been advanced by various Chinese policy-makers or a Sino-American ‘grand bargain’ on regional crisis management as the two countries remain at odds over other critical regional flashpoints.<sup>1</sup>

The second trend will be assessed in more detail here. The American postwar bilateral security alliance network – known as the ‘San Francisco System’ since its inception with the signing of the Japan Peace Treaty in September 1951 – has morphed into a less hierarchical and more pliable basis for security collaboration. Gone are the days when separate member-states of this alliance network operated relatively seamlessly under the direction of the Pentagon or US Pacific Command to contain mutually perceived threats: international communism led by the Soviet Union and China making inroads throughout Asia during the Cold War.

At least two factors explain this transition. First is the intensifying North Korean challenge to the credibility of postwar US-extended deterrence strategy which rested on traditional assumptions about an adversary’s ‘rationality’ to ensure reasonable levels of escalation control during regional crisis (Fitzpatrick, 2016). The shrill (arguably even histrionic) North Korean rhetoric threatening to engulf Seoul and much of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in a ‘sea of fire’ using weapons of mass destruction or to subject Washington and New York to a nuclear attack may or may not be taken literally. It does, however, introduce a new and strident element of nuclear brinkmanship into the region. So too does the aggressive, commensurate, rhetoric and military posturing of President Trump in response to increasingly recurrent North Korean nuclear and missile tests. Placing this rhetoric in perspective, debate has sharpened among Western experts over how soon

Kim Jong-un's increasingly formidable nuclear and missile capabilities will credibly threaten targets on the US mainland (Pollack, 2018; Ratner, 2018).

A second, complex factor which largely flows from the first is that the national security agendas of US treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific have become diverse and often contradictory. Japan feels more threatened by China than does South Korea. Yet Seoul remains sufficiently wary of Tokyo to preclude substantive bilateral Japan–ROK collaboration, absent US intercession. South Korea's current government clearly favours a more conciliatory approach toward North Korea than does either the Trump administration or the current Japanese government. As a 'Western' country situated in Asia, Australia faces no immediate existential threat. However, that country's current government, like its predecessors, fears the prospect of a looming strategic abandonment by its 'great and powerful' American friend leaving it culturally and strategically isolated in the region at a time when China is expanding its military power on its northern doorstep and when North Korea is developing long-range ballistic missiles potentially capable of hitting Australian targets (Hartcher, 2017). Policy elites now ruling the United States' other two postwar treaty allies, the Philippines and Thailand, challenge the relevance of Western liberal political values and processes. During President Barack Obama's administration, the US view was that authoritarian political trends in the two countries produced social chaos and undermined democracy. In response, both Bangkok and Manila developed closer relations with China, notwithstanding the potential loss of traditional American security guarantees, and the Philippines' continued *de facto* reliance on US military assistance to counter a rising jihadist threat in Mindanao (Flores, 2017). The Trump administration has done little to address Thai and Filipino policy-makers' concerns that American foreign policy is increasingly isolationist and that Southeast Asia is an afterthought relative to Washington's preoccupation with the North Korean nuclear threat (Sheng, 2017).

The urgency of 'traditional security' politics – succinctly defined as 'the protection of national security and sovereignty from external state-level threats and the management of the impact of major power competition' – is obviously increasing in the Asia-Pacific (Tsjeng, 2017). This has left uncertain where 'non-traditional security' – described by Mely Caballero-Anthony as 'challenges to the survival and well-being of peoples and states that arise primarily out of non-military sources' – is placed by Washington and its security allies in an era of deepening great power competition, nuclear and intensifying Indo-Pacific security dilemmas (Caballero-Anthony, 2010, p. 1).

The Trump administration's open disdain for the politics of climate change, its projected budget cuts supporting food aid and its reductions in the funding of international health programs has underscored the centrality of traditional geopolitics in its policy agenda (Busby, Grepin, & Youde, 2017; Chemnick, 2017; Lee, 2017b). President Trump's December 2017 National Security Statement (NSS) briefly addressed other emerging security threats such as terrorism and cyberspace threats. It did so, however, within the broader context of US homeland security – a focus consistent with Trump's oft advertised 'America First' posture. Moreover, Trump's NSS offered only a brief (two-page) commentary on the 'Indo-Pacific' strategic situation, representing it as a 'geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order' and best addressed by strengthening traditional defence relationships with allies and emerging security partners (White House, 2017, p. 45).

The 2017 NSS emphasised the need for the United States to underpin its own economic growth as an Indo-Pacific power by pursuing new investment opportunities and

reinvigorated bilateral trading arrangements (prioritising them over pan-regional economic and diplomatic instrumentalities) and ‘pro-growth’ national energy agendas. It envisioned the US ‘work[ing] with partners to build a network of states dedicated to free markets and protected from forces that would subvert their sovereignty’ (White House, 2017, p. 47). Within this very broad framework, such an approach could well encompass both traditional and non-traditional security policy components and alternative security networks to address them. Various forms of qualified multilateralism, and especially minilateralism, are now vying with the San Francisco System in its contemporary form as instruments of order-building in the Indo-Pacific. Understanding what these groupings are and evaluating their relative effectiveness will allow us to better assess the relevance of minilateral security politics in the region.

## Definitions

Initially some brief definitions of the types of security groupings are essential. These are offered below.

Multilateralism and multilateral security politics can be viewed as a formal effort by three or more states to build trust and avoid conflict by identifying, institutionalising and observing rules and norms for a common vision of regional or international order. It is usually an inclusive process and is designed to encourage more states to endorse its core principles of security governance by becoming members of such institutions over time (Keohane, 1990). For multilateral security politics to be effective, leading international relations theorists have asserted three pre-conditions that need to be met. *Indivisibility* needs to be realised by its member-states based on ‘socially constructed’ public goods (Ruggie, 1993, p. 11). *General organising principles* must be defined and implemented in ways that commit all member-states to observe them. No exceptions are afforded for larger power members that otherwise may prefer to follow their own interests, even at the expense of explicit institutional rules (Weber, 1991, p. viii). *Diffuse reciprocity* must be in play; there is no expectation by any of a multilateral institution’s member-states to derive immediate rewards to themselves specifically in return for participating in a collective organisational effort to defend or protect another member-state (Keohane, 1986, pp. 21–22).

Minilateralism is, conversely, a narrower and usually informal initiative intended to address a specific threat, contingency or security issue with fewer states (usually three or four) sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time. No consensus has yet been reached on how to precisely define ‘minilateralism’ in the international security context. At the end of the Cold War, Miles Kahler assessed how ‘large’ forms of collective action often morphed into ‘smaller’, more informal forms of postwar collective action initiated *within existing* multilateral institutions when the larger groupings became too unwieldy or too much at odds with domestic political interests. This revised variant of multilateralism – termed by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder as the ‘minilateral solution’ – often worked to increase the likelihood and strength of cooperation among participants (Kahler, 1992, pp. 684–685; Glosserman & Snyder, 2015, p. 162; Oye, 1986, pp. 20–21).

Victor Cha has further argued that minilateral security’s three predominant traits have been: (1) a small number of participants relative to multilateral security groupings; (2) its ad hoc characteristics as such groupings are usually formed and disbanded

without an institutional legacy; (3) a typical focus on mostly traditional security issues (Cha, 2003, pp. 116–117).

'Bilateralism', 'trilateralism' and 'quadrilateralism' are defined by the number(s) of state participants and may be components of either multilateral or minilateral security politics. Bilateralism occurs when two states cooperate on a preferential basis to realise exclusive benefits or gains in accordance with their mutual interests (Tago, 2017). Such cooperation can be embodied in a formal treaty or pursued informally depending on the common threat to be addressed or the joint security interest to be pursued. A trilateral coalition is 'situated between bilateral relationships and broader multi-partner arrangements, mak[ing] it the most minimal form of multilateralism' (Kamphausen, Park, Sahashi, & Szalwinski, 2018, p. 4). Quadrilateralism involves dialogue and intermittent material cooperation (e.g. military exercises or humanitarian and disaster relief operations) between four states. Quadrilateralism has often been linked to cooperation between 'like-minded' states such as those sharing democratic values coming together in ways to balance (tacitly) against an actual or potentially hostile power (Campbell, Patel, & Singh, 2011).

### The multilateral climate

Critics, particularly those from the realist school of international relations theory, have asserted that multilateral institutions such as ASEAN and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which emerged during the 1970s and 1980s did not meet their objectives. More comprehensive multilateral security dialogues in the region followed with the inception of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in the early 1990s and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005. Neither the ARF nor the EAS, however, have satisfied the three definition-cited preconditions for a viable collective security institution. The prospect of forging socially constructed public goods, for example, cannot withstand states' predominant tendency to pursue national self-interest if they are given a choice between adopting one of these two approaches. If states conclude they have little to gain from collaborating on regional or international security problems there is little prospect that they will play the 'long game' demanded by diffuse reciprocity or adhere to general organising principles sufficiently binding to ensure their strategic restraint (Mearsheimer, 1994/1995, pp. 15, 31–33; Kratochwil, 1993, pp. 70–71).

In postwar Europe, past legacies of crumbling alliances and great wars strengthened regional leaders' incentive to establish multilateral norms and institutions designed to guarantee European economic prosperity and collective security. However, there has been no commensurate historical experience applicable to the Indo-Pacific. Many Asian sovereignties were the products of accelerated postwar decolonisation and many of their territorial, irredentist and ideological differences which generated profound security dilemmas. Under such conditions, the prospects for Indo-Pacific multilateral security politics were dim. As John Ruggie (perhaps somewhat ruefully) observed, a 'reasonably stable' balance of power underpinned by the superpowers' embrace of bilateral alliances became a predominant mode of Asian security politics (Ruggie, 1992, p. 563).

In this context, minilateralism may come to be viewed by Washington's policy planners as a useful variant of multilateralism for realising US security objectives. Minilateralism's viability as an Indo-Pacific security approach, however, will depend on how successful the United States ultimately will be in transforming the San Francisco System into a more fluid and complex regional security network. To test this argument's validity,

the inter-relationship between minilateralism and multilateralism in an Indo-Pacific security context will first be discussed. How successfully minilateralism has been applied as a US policy tool in the Indo-Pacific to date will then be considered.

### **Minilateralism as a multilateral security variant**

Minilateralism's appeal relates to its inherent flexibility, relatively low transaction costs and voluntary rather than mandatory kinds of commitment ordained by major power affiliates. The appeal of minilateralism, as Moises Naim has observed, is that it is a 'smarter, more targeted approach ... bring[ing] to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on a particular problem' (Naim, 2009). The characteristics and manageability of minilateralism can be viewed as a viable contemporary alternative to multilateralism and bilateralism at a time when US hegemony is arguably declining in the absence of any alternative Asian security order rising to take its place. Minilateralism, as part of its appeal, is voluntary rather than contractual; disaggregated rather than comprehensive; usually regional rather than global; and 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' (Patrick, 2015, p. 116).<sup>2</sup> Proponents of minilateral security dialogues and associations also argue that they have 'second order traditional security effects' by strengthening the resilience of existing bilateral security alliances. The confidence-building dynamics ingrained in joint American, Japanese and South Korean security consultations and coordination on the North Korean nuclear issue can potentially modify the historical Japan–ROK security via American adjudication of Tokyo's and Seoul's differences and are illustrative (Cha, 2003, pp. 117–118).

Critiques of minilateralism include the concern that a smaller or more streamlined grouping relative to multilateral ones does not automatically guarantee success in managing any given security issue. It is essential that the *right* participants engage in any minilateral security enterprise for it to have a greater chance of success.<sup>3</sup> Despite the United States' substantial efforts to coordinate security collaboration between Japan and South Korea in response to a growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat, the three countries' Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group or TCOG (established in 1999) floundered over still powerful historical and politico-economic differences between Washington's two Northeast Asian allies. Ultimately, North Korea's reluctance to adopt the formulas postulated by its negotiating partners to achieve that end led to that grouping's de facto termination.

A second concern relates to external states' perceptions of a minilateral grouping's actual purpose. Recent minilateral groupings involving four or more parties that have been proposed but not successfully implemented are illustrative: the Quadrilateral Initiative (2007–2008) involving Australia, India, Japan and the United States, and intermittent suggestions for a 'League of Democracies' involving NATO and non-communist Asian states (the most notable variant of which was proposed by US Republican Presidential candidate John McCain in 2008). In both of these cases, China argued forcefully and successfully that such associations were merely derivatives of NATO's traditional containment strategy and would be directed primarily against itself. The Quadrilateral Initiative has been lately revived but whether its fate will be more successful than its original counterpart given the on-going escalation of Sino-American tensions in the South China Sea remains unclear.

Trilateralism has thus far seemed to be more adaptive than other minilateral variants in Asia in addressing specific issue areas. Michael Green, arguably the leading authority

on this trend, has surmised that 'future historians will look back at this active trilateralism as characterizing an intermediate phase between regional orders, as diverse states sought to hedge and shape an immature architecture still resting uneasily on the stability provided by bilateral alliances and the hope of growing economic interdependence' (Green, 2014, p. 770).

Will Green's observation prove to be prescient or premature as the Asia-Pacific security setting takes shape over the remainder of this decade and beyond? For it to be validated, US-led minilateral security groupings will need to move beyond their current and relative modest functions of generating low-key dialogues (often on the 'sidelines' of multilateral summits and meetings) and conducting intermittent military exercises. They will have to navigate successfully between the shoals of great power competition and the hegemonic tendencies that Kai He has described in his aforementioned article as 'competitive multilateralism'. Minilaterals will also need to establish a credible reputation over time as increasingly appropriate channels apart from the Indo-Pacific's existing and arguably stale multilateral forums for coordinating or negotiating regional security questions.

Indeed, as noted above, realists and others have largely written off most forms of multilateralism as nothing more than a license for unwieldy and fruitless talking-shops when dealing with high security issues. Should minilateralism likewise be discounted due to their US-led membership composition or their tendency to be viewed as merely watered down instruments of containment strategy directed by Washington?

To evaluate minilateralism's current and future viability in the Indo-Pacific region's security politics, a brief assessment will now be offered on minilateralism's potential to bridge the asymmetrical 'hub-and-spokes' arrangement underwriting the bilateral US alliance system in Asia with the rapidly evolving structural changes in the Indo-Pacific which are seriously challenging multilateralism's relevance as an order-building mechanism there.

### **Minilateralism's role in US security politics toward the Indo-Pacific**

As early as the immediate post-Cold War timeframe in the late 1990s, US policy-makers and their allied counterparts in Japan, South Korea and Australia recognised that rapid structural changes in the Indo-Pacific strategic environment compelled them to search for ways to adapt the San Francisco System's time-honoured postwar 'hub-and-spokes' system. China presents a different form of security challenge than that previously confronting Washington and its regional security partners. 'China's rise', with its trading and investment benefits, is transforming the Indo-Pacific balance of power. Other policy approaches are clearly required by the US and its allies to hedge against the intensifying Asian geopolitical transition.

Multilateralism 2.0 (as Kai He labels it) emerged in the late 1990s and again, more prominently, during the Obama administration as a 'default strategy'. Minilateralism and informal bilateral security partnerships both surfaced as logical derivatives of this process and as a means to restore the San Francisco System's relevance. Bilateral 'partnerships' with selected countries in the region are being promoted by Washington in niche areas where such countries' interests coincided with those of the United States. The US and Singapore have signed a 15-year memorandum of understanding in 1990 to grant the US Navy systematic access to Singaporean naval and logistical air facilities. The US and India have signed a 10-year defence agreement in 2005 and subsequently catalysed what is now a substantial defence relationship in terms of both arms sales and joint



military exercises. Vietnamese–American security ties have recently accelerated, and significant US defence ties with Taiwan and New Zealand have been sustained (Tow & Limaye, 2016, pp. 13–18).

US alliance revitalisation and security partnership cultivation at the bilateral level during the late 1990s was accompanied by Washington's investigation of how minilateral security approaches might be employed to address regional security issues. The United States' voluntary (non-binding) participation in minilateral initiatives was deemed to compare favourably to bilateral collective defence arrangements as the credibility of US commitments remained vulnerable to oscillating American global strategy shifting away from the Asia-Pacific to focus on the Middle East, international terrorism and other priorities. The flexibility inherent in such minilateral cooperation and directed toward region-specific threats and challenges, without facing such traditional collective defence problems as alliance entrapment or abandonment, was an appealing outlook (Tow & Limaye, 2016, pp. 18–19).

Minilateral alignments led by the United States have thus recently developed in the Indo-Pacific as a means of complementing the San Francisco System's bilateral alliance politics. 'Junior allies' in postwar bilateral security partnerships with the United States previously deferred to Washington on short-term issues in return for gaining longer-term alliance benefits. However, the scale and nature of those benefits or 'collective goods' such as deterrence guarantees and defence technology transfers have gradually become more tenuous as the region's balance of power and its threat environment have transformed. Japan's and South Korea's traditional faith in US-extended deterrence commitments relative to a growing North Korean nuclear threat, for example, is now being tested. Trump's 'America first' rhetoric during his presidential campaign, speculating about the need for greater Japanese and South Korean defence burden-sharing within an alliance context, has tested that faith (Haberman & Sanger, 2016; Kamphausen et al., 2018; Townshend, 2017, pp. 5, 14–16).

The Philippines and Thailand, the United States' two formal treaty allies in Southeast Asia, distanced themselves from the San Francisco System due to their current leaderships' recent differences with the Obama administration over governance and human rights. As ASEAN members, both countries are becoming increasingly concerned with such non-traditional security concerns as counter-terrorism, organised crime, climate change and forced peoples' movements. Minilateral coalitions addressing such non-traditional challenges with the US and other San Francisco System member-states are one policy option that could be strongly considered to address such challenges. A successful precedent for this approach was the formation of a short-lived but highly effective 'Core Group' of Australia, India, Japan and the United States to provide timely human security assistance and disaster relief to countries affected by the December 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean region.

Several experiments in US minilateral security politics instigated over the past decade or so now give us a basis of judgement as to their effectiveness. Arguably the most significant of these was Australia, Japan and the US entering into a 'Trilateral Security Dialogue' or TSD (in 2005) at the ministerial level. This initiative was in response to both the US–Japan and US–Australia bilateral defence alliances' evolution from national security-centric accords to arrangements that responded to an increasingly wide scope of international security threats by adopting order-building postures.

Another trilateral dialogue was launched by two US treaty allies (Australia and Japan) and an emerging US security partner (India) to coordinate these countries' interest on

maritime security, counter-terrorism strategies, regional connectivity and other challenges mandating collective security collaboration. All three participants share a determination to promote the rule of law as the binding norm for regional order-building and a concern that in its absence, China could eventually implement its own rules for regional security governance. This has been a low-key but successful venture, with the fourth session addressing key Indo-Pacific security issues convening in New Delhi during December 2017 (Government of India, 2017).

It remains to be seen if fresh efforts to expand this trilateral arrangement during side-talks at the November 2017 ASEAN Summit in Manila, and to revisit the Quadrilateral Dialogue Initiative which was originally suspended in 2008, will succeed (Wyeth, 2017). However, a form of creative minilateralism (Nilsson-Wright, 2017; Pant, 2017) has been anticipated by Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's recent public, carefully worded, speculation about the positive inter-relationship between the TSD and the 'early stage of a trilateral strategic dialogue between Australia, Japan and India' (Bishop, 2017; Lee 2017a).

### **Cross-comparing low-key multilateralism with minilateralism**

Despite the presence of various multilateral security frameworks in the Indo-Pacific – mostly cultivated by ASEAN in its self-proclaimed role as the region's order-building 'locomotive' during what Kai He has deemed the 'multilateralism 1.0' era – the region lacks anything resembling the historical authority, common values and joint mechanisms underwriting the NATO framework. The ARF's agenda for realising a 'comprehensive security' formula has not been realised and the East Asia Summit's actual role as a community-building agent remains ambiguous and buried within the confines of ASEAN Ministerial Meetings. There is an apparent inability of Asia-Pacific multilateral groupings that adhere to the 'ASEAN way' principle of member-state parity to resolve core 'hard security' issues in the region (see Teo & Singh, 2016).

Minilateralism, on the other hand, represents a potentially viable policy option for addressing tensions emanating from dependency and resource disparities that larger and smaller allies intermittently experience in asymmetrical 'hub-and-spokes' alliance politics, and for bargaining security issues between institutional member-states. As Green has observed, 'US alliance-centred trilaterals often act like caucuses within a legislature rather than collective security arrangements aimed at a third party' (Green, 2014, p. 761). They are united by common democratic political systems, the need to avoid hierarchical predominance by the rival and potentially hostile hegemon (i.e. China) in the Indo-Pacific region, and a shared aspiration to cultivate a stable and predictable regional order-building process. They attempt, by acting minilaterally, to 'get the balance right' between the US senior ally/partner and the gains accrued by other allies/partners. This balance involving US allies and partners invariably falls short of deriving complete advantage in such associations, but is substantially beneficial relative to specific issue-areas. Ideally, achieving such a balance makes minilateralism more than merely a 'talking-shop' exercise – a sustained criticism levelled towards larger multilateral groupings in the region. Minilateralism facilitates the pursuit of a mutually agreed objective. In this sense, it can act (as Green asserts) as a bridging component between the Cold War driven 'hub-and-spokes' system of the past and an as yet undefined and imperfect but effective multilateral order-building architecture.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the US and its allies should identify five preconditions as a basis for strengthening and adoption of minilateral security politics in the Indo-Pacific. First, minilateralism should never be viewed as completely replacing existing alliances and institutions but as complementing them. Second, it should allow policy planners to focus on niche areas where shared interests and values can be identified and pursued. In this context (as a third precondition), minilateralism should emphasise expanded and more effective 'spoke-to-spoke' relations amongst US allies.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, minilateral cooperation should be sufficiently durable to withstand changes in US and allied political leadership that could otherwise render such collaboration outdated or irrelevant. Finally, minilateral security cooperation should be viewed as more than just 'threat-centric' in character. It should be regarded as a 'bridge building' tool which can be employed with the San Francisco System alliance network.

There remain at least two major impediments to the maturation of minilateral security politics in the Indo-Pacific as it relates to US and allied security interests. The first is that a security crisis in the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, or elsewhere will erupt in ways that results in policy-makers losing control to outcomes (nuclear and/or great power wars) that will stifle any pretence of order-building. The second is that either formal or ad hoc minilateral initiatives will be overwhelmed and could default to classical power balancing.

Minilateralism is a relatively ephemeral means to achieve a specific policy end. It is often an intrinsically fragile process for security collaboration, subject to changes in the domestic politics of its affiliate participant states or in the overall regional environment that render it irrelevant as time passes. The TCOG 'morphed' into the Six Party Talks as North Korea's nuclear capabilities intensified and the George W. Bush administration concluded it was best to 'lead from behind' by having China as the prime mover. The Quadrilateral Initiative died a quiet death once its major proponent – Abe Shinzo – stepped down from his first term as Japan's prime minister in September 2007 and as the new Australian Labor government at the time became increasingly susceptible to Chinese pressure against this initiative. More recently, Japanese and South Korean intelligence-sharing and logistical coordination has been upgraded against an intensified North Korean threat, but still remains susceptible to the vagaries of South Korean domestic politics. These politics are more than capable of jettisoning the recent US deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defence system in Seoul or constraining Japanese support of US military operations in the seas adjacent to South Korean territory.

The future role of the United States as an Indo-Pacific security actor directly affects the viability of any 'minilateral solution' in that region's geopolitics. President Trump's apparent determination to 'make allies (and partners) pay more' for sustained US strategic involvement in the region, and to rely on China to fulfil US and allied interests in leveraging Pyongyang (notwithstanding his projected summit with Kim Jong-un), could erode traditional relative gains for US allies. The extent to which the US is still willing or capable of sustaining a viable geopolitical footprint in the Indo-Pacific beyond a largely unilateral (and many observers would assert 'impulsive') basis shrouds the future outlook for Indo-Pacific minilateral security politics. So too does the need for increasingly direct great power (Sino-American) negotiation and/or coordination on problems of Indo-Pacific crisis management. In this sense, expectations that future historians will

recall minilateralism as only a prelude to whatever will be the next phase of Indo-Pacific order-building may, unfortunately perhaps, be premature.

## Notes

1. Background on China's major power relations initiative is provided by Chen (2015) and Kiracofe (2017). For a thorough explanation of the grand bargain scenario, see Glaser (2015).
2. Patrick (2015, p. 116) lists other qualities, including 'trans-governmental rather than just intergovernmental... multi-level and multi-stakeholder rather than state-centric'. For purposes of this analysis, however, minilateralism is applied only as it operates in a state-centric context.
3. This point is raised in an unpublished and undated draft paper written by Jeremy Malcolm which cannot be formally cited here.
4. That said, such cooperation may be mostly functional and conditional rather than enduring and unqualified. Japanese–South Korean intelligence and logistical collaboration intended to deter a North Korean threat, for example, will not necessarily 'spill over' to form a passionate and unreserved bond unfettered by long-standing historical tensions.

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